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HIROSHIGE, THE ARTIST OF MIST
SNOW AND RAIN: AN ESSAY BY
MARY MCNEIL FENOLLOSA, WITH
ILLUSTRATIONS, AND FAC-SIMILES
OF SOME FAMOUS SIGNATURES



VICKERY, ATKINS & TORREY
550 SUTTER ST., SAN FRANCISCO

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A RAINSTORM
OUTSIDE
TOKIO

HIROSHIGE, THE ARTIST OF MIST, SNOW AND RAIN

AN ESSAY

THE art of the last few centuries in Japan was sharply divided into two parts. The first of these was aristocratic; an art based upon Chinese classical tradition and practiced by the Kano artists of the Tokugawa Shoguns' Court. In it Chinese poets, artists, emperors, as well as famous landscape views still lived; little that was purely Japanese found representation. The second branch of art was the spontaneous outcome of a joyous nation cut off by caste and profession from the haughty nobles who protected and oppressed them. With the latter half alone our essay has to deal.

In the earlier stages of this art, figures and street groups were favorite subjects of portrayal. Here were depicted, for the first time, phases of contemporary life, portraits of reigning belles, domestic incidents, religious observances, picnic or boating parties, drinking bouts and tea-house revels. About this date the first Yedo theaters were established, with plays written by and for the common people, and play-bills issued by the newly arisen artists of block-printing. It soon became a fashion to depict favorite actors in various rôles. There were no cameras in those days. Daily life was mirrored in a thousand prints and picture-books corresponding to our illustrated newspapers and colored supplements of to-day; and, to this movement, this new prolific school, some Japanese Thackeray gave the name *Ukiyoe*,—the Drifting or Floating World.

The landscape, up to this point, had appeared only in backgrounds, and was never treated as an independent subject. It was sketchy, meagre and inadequate, yet with something in its quaint lines and harmonious relation to foreground objects which strongly suggests the backgrounds of early Italian painters, notably Giotto and Fra Angelico.

The first Ukiyoe artist who attempted to expand it into an independent branch of pictorial art was Utagawa Toyoharu, who, about the year 1770, having seen and studied some old Dutch woodcuts which had found their way into the empire through the little Dutch colony at Nagasaki, conceived the idea of rendering the landscape of his own country into similar forms. It is interesting to see his initial attempts at foreign realism and perspective. The foliage of trees is drawn with such painful minuteness that it loses all resemblance to Japanese vegetation; the round, carefully modeled white clouds seem to be held in air by concealed wires, while in some of his conflicts with perspective the garden of a tea-house is thrown far away from the building to which it belongs, and street vistas dive headlong beneath the startled horizon. Toyoharu's signature トヨハラ哥門 continued such experiments with ever-increasing satisfaction to himself and his admirers.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, the Japanese people, uneducated for the most part, and wrapped up in their own amusements, quarrels and

dissipations, began to turn their attention slowly outward to the world of nature. Birds, flowers, animals and trees were studied and included among the details of landscape. This tendency toward a collection of scientific facts was due, in great measure, to the influence of the Dutch, who continued to disseminate throughout Japan a faint glow of the knowledge of science and history as studied in Western countries.

During such an awakening it is not remarkable that the Japanese nation should seek cognizance of itself as a whole. The aristocrats of Yedo scorned and feared external influences. The Mikado, behind his great Kioto walls, did homage to his ancestors and cared little for those of foreign emperors; but the common people began to ask, "What is it that we stand for as a nation? What place have we in this great world?" Artists and writers hastened to offer interpretation. Great historical novels appeared with illustrations by no less a genius than Hokusai, and huge encyclopedic collections of sketches delineating every aspect and object of the known and unknown world.

It was at this period, also, that the well-known passion of the Japanese for travel received new stimulus. There was an epidemic of pilgrims. Shrines and famous views were visited, roads made through the dense forests on the slopes of Fuji-San, and paths up the snow-fields of the peak. Whole families, with clothing, cooking apparatus, and babies in hampers, spent the summer months in delightful loitering along seashore and lake, or among mountains. Guide-books vied with one another in accuracy of topographical information and beauty of the accompanying designs. The gem-like landscapes of these books are often masterpieces of line and mass, yet at the time of making they were the cheapest illustrations for handbooks of travel.

Among Toyohiro's pupils there was one called Hiroshige. This young artist was keen enough to see the wonderful opportunity thus afforded by popular interest in scenery to develop an entirely independent art of landscape representation. His first experiment was to print his illustrations on separate sheets instead of binding them in heavy books. Then, not content to leave them mere black and white outlines, he began the use of those colors familiar to us in the beautiful figure-

groups of Harunobu, Kiyonaga, and others. At last he declared his ambition to give to Japan her wealth of scenic effects in colors such as no artist before him had thought of using. There had never been until this time a school of landscape painting in which the color of natural objects had given the key to the entire composition. Both in Kano and the bird, flower, and landscape school of Shijo, the composition was based upon line and mass, with color only as a faint tinting to vary the monotony of the grays. In the ancient Tosa landscapes rich color was indeed used, but even then it was little more than an illuminated background to throw forward groups of richly attired figures. In Hiroshige's new method the Japanese beheld for the first time landscape art as a mosaic of characteristic local colors. His skies were solid blue, pink, purple, or lead-color, with clouds or sunsets in realistic hues; his foliage solid greens of opposing values. The reds of temples, the browns and grays and azures of wooden bridges and buildings, even the colors of peasants' clothing, enter the same scale with colors of sky and earth, diversifying rather than dominating them.

Another peculiarity of Hiroshige's method was the flatness of his tones and the incredibly small number required for full pictorial effect, a technique rendered possible, even necessary, by the economy of printing from flat wooden blocks. Thus the whole wealth of atmospheric color which Western artists treat in an infinity of painfully modulated washes, was often achieved by four or five instantaneous impressions from as many coarsely cut blocks. To command such effects it was obviously necessary that the relative hues and values of the few colors used should be selected with exquisite balance. It was in this way that the principles of landscape "grammar," so to speak, were discovered in Japan before the modern schools of France evolved them in the West.

With this technique Hiroshige depicted, readily enough, those ordinary aspects of life and nature which flat-block printing would seem to suggest. He chained for us the bold, dazzling sweep of foam on Kamakura's curved sea-beach; he stamped in jagged silhouettes the black rocks off Enoshima, or with the unflecked whiteness of paper left untouched, the sharp wedge of Fuji-San

the Peerless. Of human figures, sometimes it was a group of tired workmen homeward bound on a lonely road, or again the antics of a picnic-party for whom the delights of the *Sake-keg* had proved more intoxicating than the beauty of the cherry-blossoms above. There were no artists of this or any other period who knew and loved Yedo as Hiroshige knew and loved it. His countless inspired views of the great city and its iridescent life have caused his name to be loved and honored in Japan even among the aristocrats, who still despise his school as vulgar, and refuse to give to its masterpieces the name of art.

But this alone could not have made Hiroshige what he has become to artists in the West. A master, to be remembered, must not only originate new methods, but with them give to the world something unforgettable and not to be imitated, and this Hiroshige has done in his marvelous rendition of the subtle, the elusive, the momentary, in atmospheric phenomena. It was in his power to breathe into his graded ink-tones the impalpable texture of wind and vapor, the clinging moisture of snow, the essence, character—almost the smell—of rain. His spirit seemed a part of these

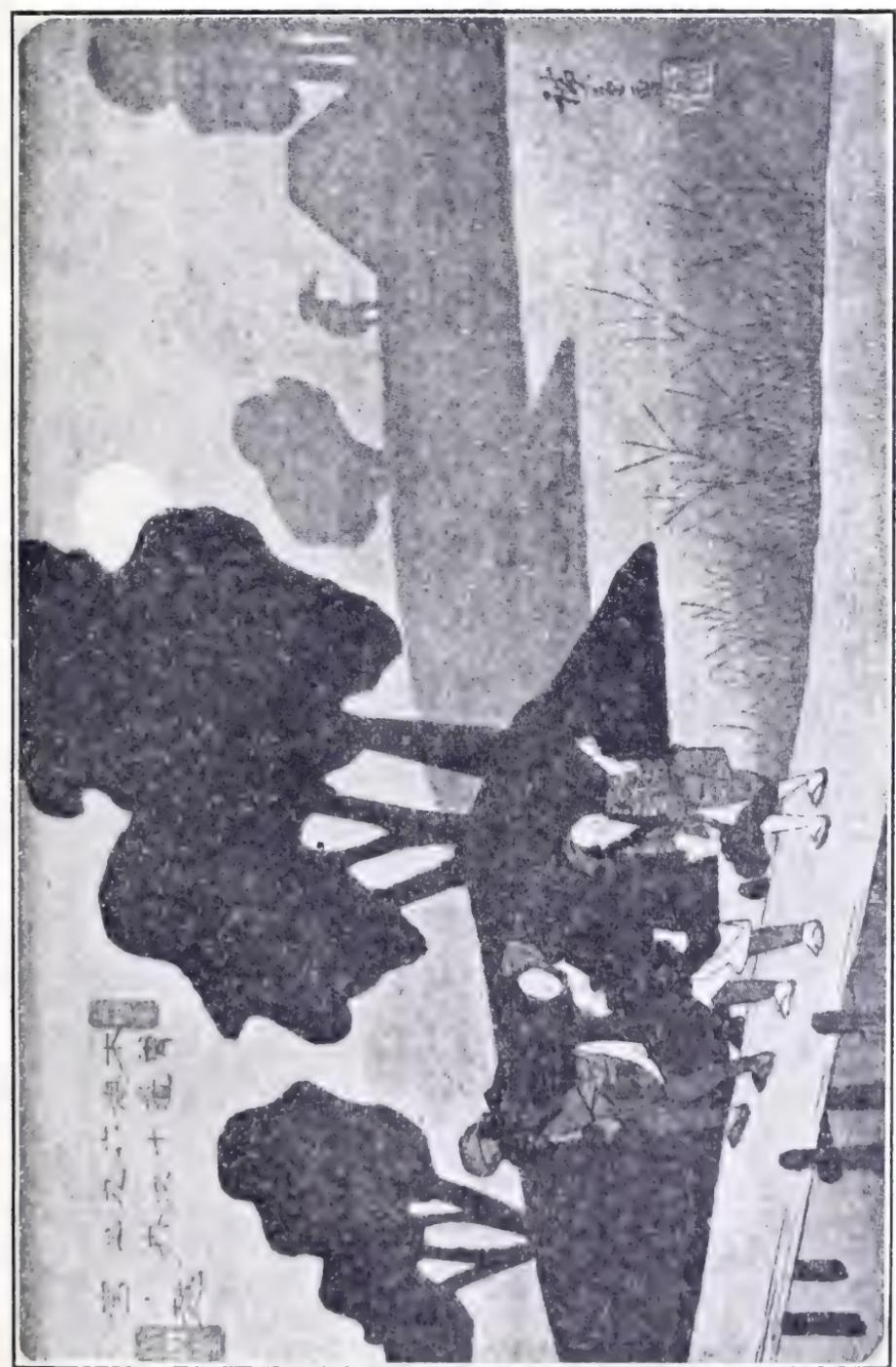
things. It was not technique alone which told him how to blur a commonplace object into wonderful dim outlines, or to heap his cottage roofs with massed white vacancies of snow.

His methods, at first glance, appear inexplicable, but once known are ridiculously simple. We ask, "How can this man with his crude hand-apparatus and a half-dozen wooden blocks gain effects over which Corot might have spent months in vain?" "Diluted inks," the modern print-maker tells us. "A deft blur with the finger on the wet block just before it is applied to the absorbent paper; a deliberate yet nervous grading of the force with which the block is pressed down." These directions, however, give but little hint of the consummate genius required to employ them. After all, it takes Hiroshige himself to lure within a small inky rectangle the changeless impression of a moment's passing loveliness; to spread his mists in breezy places from whence no wind can drive them, his snows unmelting in winter sunshine, his rain forever falling, yet never at an end.

In no other country of the world have I seen mists like these in Japan. They fill the universe with clinging azure particles, or, mixed with faggot-smoke, sink down in ghostly strata upon a flat

desert of blue-tiled roofs. They transform city and suburb alike; rice-fields gleam up through them like uncut emeralds in cloud-quartz, and trees take on new and mysterious forms. It is worth your while to be up before the sun in Tokio, if only for a walk about the inner moat. The old Chinese pines writhe down in gigantic vagueness over moat walls that seem hewn from thick gray cubes of mist; a crow flying past is an ambiguous shadow, the peaked castle gate swims detached in an upper stratum of powdered amethyst. Across, from the tall moat walls, and many feet below them, lie the city streets on which you walk. The edges next the moat are planted with willows at regular intervals. In the early mist they seem like great sponges breathing out dampness.

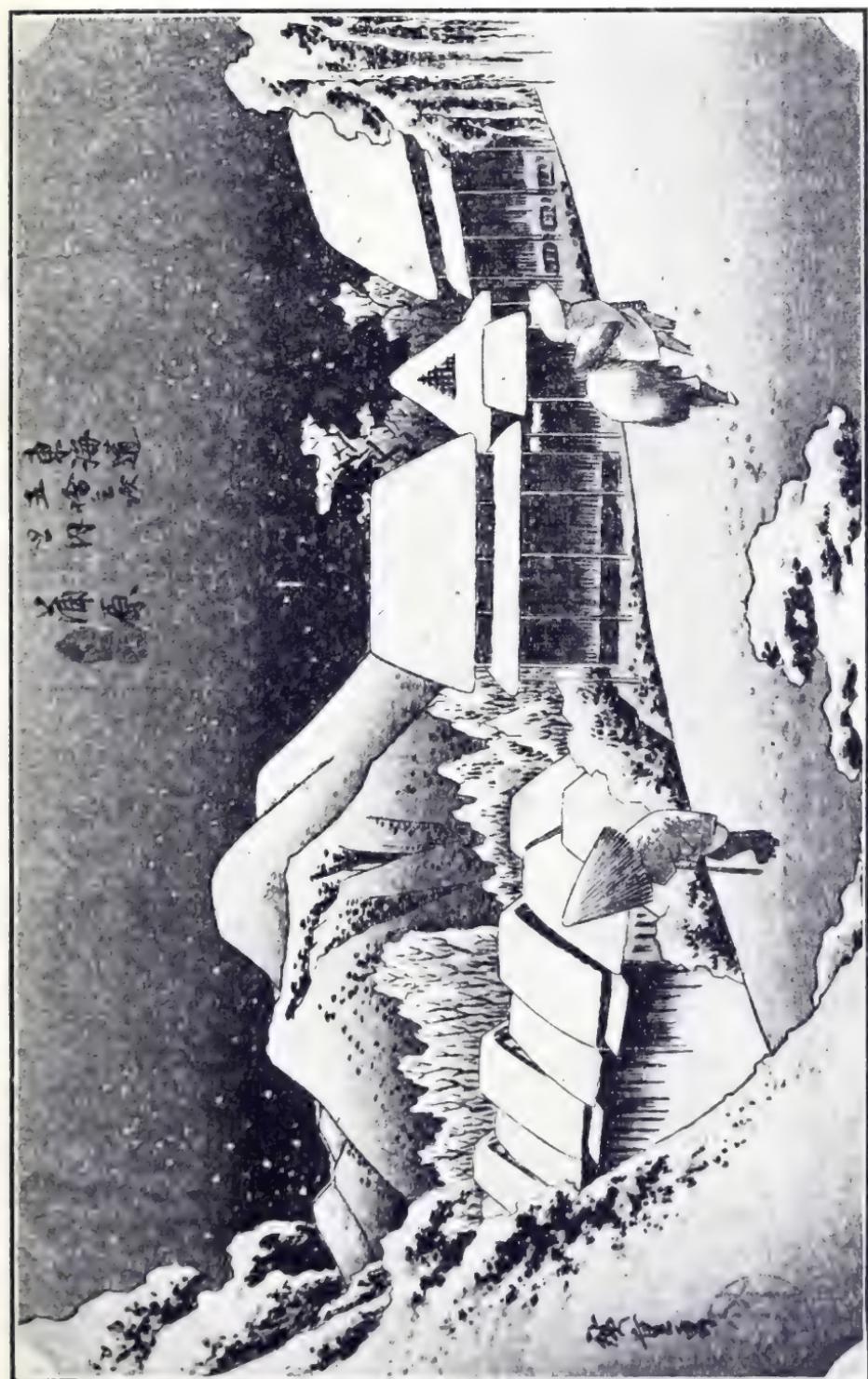
The first illustration here given is that of a village suburb on the Nakasendo, one of the famous mountain highways of Japan. It represents a glimpse of pond or streamlet, banks upon which willows are growing, a group of country people crossing a bridge, an old farmer in the background near a straw-thatched roof half hidden behind the farther bank, and a flat white sun—or moon—not far above the horizon. It may be objected that the group of willows in the foreground would, in



SUBURB OF A
VILLAGE
ON THE
NAKASENDO

nature, show more detail. This criticism might hold good in other places, but it does not hold good in Japan. Again and again of summer mornings, the moat willows in front of our house take on silhouettes exactly like these in the picture, retaining their single, flat tone at a distance of only a few yards; while opposite, among the old castle pines, a baffled sun hangs dull and tarnished as a pewter tray.

Even more than in these mist phenomena, Hiroshige was fortunate in the natural aspects of snow which he studied and from which he derived inspiration. To the Japanese poet and lover of nature, snow did not seem a thing to be painted, any more than wind or sunlight were to be painted. He worshipped it, studied its effects, and afterwards attempted to fix the impression—that was all. To daub it on like whitewash or icing was a method which did not present itself. He felt it to be a pause, a silence,—like the personal name of a Deity. So he drew with unspeakable tenderness the outline of a tree changed beneath its white burden, he portrayed the round ghost-blossoms of a leafless cherry grove, he breathed pale radiance out through the graphic space



SNOW ON
THE TOKAIDO

incrusting the twigs of a plum-tree,—and that was, to him, the blush of a plum-flower in snow. Our Western artists are crude and far behind the Japanese in this branch of art at least. A pastry-cook might have applied the snow in many of our foreign winter scenes. The secret is that it can, in truth, never be applied at all, but must be left untouched, a suggestion, an unreality,—not a mere clumsy fact.

In rain-studies Hiroshige combined the methods which he used in rendering mist and snow, the blur of the one, the changed pregnant outlines of the other; and to these he added a third effect, that of rainfall indicated by sharp black or gray lines dominating the foreground of his picture. The variety of impression thus given is almost endless. In one of his most famous views of the Tokaido the lines of rain are blurred, banded and oblique. The drenched bamboos dip all one way; the cottage roofs seem to cower down behind the mountain road; two peasants in the foreground set a half-opened paper umbrella against the storm; the *kago*-bearers are naked and indifferent; the whole picture seems to be soughing and dripping in the sudden storm. In another view, taken in the



A RAINSTORM
ON THE
TOKAIDO

heart of the great city, the rain is a mere sprinkle, a lazy coquetry of summer clouds. Nothing is vague. The tiled roofs of the castle are blue in the distance, and Fuji-San has not even the preception of a cloud. You feel the sunshine upon the mountain's base, but Yedo will be fresh and sweet after the pretentious little shower has laughed itself away. Sometimes a whole picture is of a uniform leaden tone. A sheet of water falls helplessly from the upper to the lower edge. Trees and houses are black, sullen, soaked through and through with rain. You feel instinctively the essence of a rainy day in June. Gloves might mildew if kept in a drawer with this picture.

Mist, Snow and Rain! To those who know and love Japan, these are names to conjure with. No sunshine could be so beautiful, we think; no bare, blue heavens so tender. Let all who love fair weather only, set sail for other lands; but as for me, may the kind year still bring long lines of willows in silhouette against the gray moat wall; that winter miracle, the piled white nothingness of snow; and the smell of wind-driven rain bowing down the dark, clogged tips of a bamboo grove!

MARY MCNEIL FENOLLOSA.

SOME SIGNATURES OF THE
MASTERS OF UKIOYE

春章重

Shunsho
d. 1792

鈴木春信画

Suzuki Harunobu
1747-1818

清長画

Kiyonaga
d. 1814

鳥居清長画

Kiyonobu
1688-1730

西川祐信画

Nishikawa Sukenobu
1671-1760

若狭川師宣画

Hishikawa Moronobu
1643-1711-15

十人
漢

Hokkei
1780-1856-9

浮城子

Hokusai
1760-1849

舟立
煙火

Toyohiro
d. 1828

曲豆國五

Toyokuni
1768-1825

歌川
勝

Utamaro
1754-1806

歌川
勝

Yeishi
fl. bet. 1781-1800

喜多川歌麿

Hiroshige

歌麿

Hiroshige
1793-1859

歌麿

Keisai Yeisen
1790-1848

歌麿

Kuniyoshi
1800-1861

歌麿

Kunisada
1785-1864

喜多川歌麿

Yeizan
fl. bet. 1810-1830



Tsuta-ya Juzabro
Yedo. Died 1797

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